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ABSTRACT

Based on data obtained from the state supervisors of foreign languages by the Joint National Committee for Languages, this brief report lists the threats that jeopardize the status of language programs in the United States. These include: budget constraints; the possibility of further minimizing the federal role in education; reversing the education reform efforts achieved during the 103rd Congress with the implementation of Goals 2000 and "Improving America's Schools"; and the isolationist attitude pervading Congress, which could affect any and all programs that are international in scope. Also detailed are the threats that loom at the state and local levels. The final section highlights the threats to language education in a select number of states, including New York, Wisconsin, Texas, North Carolina, Colorado, California, Washington, Georgia, and Massachusetts. (JL)

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Major Threats to Foreign Language Education in the U.S.A.: A Brief Overview

By Julie E. Inman

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MAJOR THREATS TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE U.S.: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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Based on data obtained from the state supervisors of foreign languages by the Joint National Committee for Languages (JNCL), there are common threats that jeopardize the status of language programs in the U.S. At the federal level, these include:

1) Tight budgetary constraints; domestic discretionary spending being reduced significantly to lower the federal debt.

2) The possibility of further minimizing the federal role in education. Specifically, the prospect of abolishing some of the major federal agencies responsible for funding and administering international and educational exchange programs, including the United States Information Agency (USIA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the Department of Education (DOE).

3) Reversing the education reform efforts achieved during the 103rd Congress with the implementation of *Goals 2000* and *Improving America's Schools.* Foreign languages were included in as one of the core subjects, and efforts towards standards development, equity, professional development, and testing and assessment could be halted in their tracks.

4) The isolationist attitude pervading Congress could affect any and all programs that are international in scope. Immigration reform, and movements to make English the "official language of government" and repeal bilingual education programs are also indicative of this insular tendency.

American education has a long history of minimal federal involvement (the federal share of spending on education amounts to only eight per cent of the total funding for education). As such, the major threats loom at the state and local level. These threats include:

1) The same budgetary constraints faced at the federal level. State legislatures are looking for places to cut funding and the mood of the electorate makes it politically infeasible to raise taxes or pass levies to fund education programs.

2) Grassroots conservative movements pose a threat to public education as we know it. Tying standards to the vilified "outcomes based education" and the push for private school vouchers and charter schools undermine the current system.

3) Persistent downsizing of state departments of education and "site-based management" have led to the use of education generalists in lieu of curriculum specialists. A recent JNCL state survey has shown that only 12 states have specialists in foreign languages, while another 12 have eliminated foreign language supervisors altogether. The remaining 26 states have multi-disciplinary curriculum supervisors or full-fledged education generalists.

4) The shortage of qualified language teachers that exist (at last count) in 35 states provides a rationale for state and local administrators to cut existing programs or refrain from establishing new ones.

5) While foreign languages are included as one of the "core subjects" in the National Education Goals, only 27 states have embraced languages as part of their core curricula. This may be because of the lower priority afforded world languages by some, funding shortages, or by competition with other disciplines for time during the school day.

6) While technology has revolutionized education in many ways, it is still improperly used in some locales. Technology should be used to supplement the current curriculum, but is increasingly being used to supplant teachers or to cut costs.

7) While equity has always been a tenet of education policy in the U.S., the trend toward serving only the educationally-gifted may influence the study of languages in this country. Languages have long been considered by some to be "elitist" or a "frill" elective; today, 10 states only require language study for college-bound students or advanced diploma candidates.

8) Lack of foresight or understanding of the important role languages have to play in the twenty-first century threaten the status of languages in the curriculum. Languages need to be included in vocational and adult education, and for global communications management. As the world approaches the "Knowledge Age", communicative ability will be highly valued and necessary to success.

9) Under the guise of "resisting mandates from Washington," many states and localities are opposed to any federal involvement in education and are rejecting policies and funding that have come down from Congress or the President.

SPECIFIC THREATS TO A SELECT NUMBER OF STATES

New York The new Republican Governor, George Pataki, recently assailed foreign languages in his "State of the State" address, and subsequently proposed to eliminate language study in the middle school grades in his budget. Currently, New York is one of nine states that includes languages other than English in their elementary curriculum; eliminating languages in the middle school grades will disrupt the articulated sequence which is necessary for achieving proficiency.

Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson recently announced a proposal that would circumvent his state's constitution. Essentially, the Governor is proposing to undercut the power of the publically elected state superintendent of education and to personally appoint his own "pointperson" to oversee state department of education activities. This cabinet-style appointment could allow Gov. Thompson to cut education staff and programs with little accountability.

Texas While grassroots far-right movements have been omnipresent in Texas education and politics, newly-elected Gov. Bush and a conservative state legislature are poised to stop education reform in its tracks. The Lone Star perspective that "Texas knows best what Texas needs" has been reiterated by Bush, and he has stated that Texas does not need "Washington's mandates or dollars."

In addition, the Governor has introduced in the state legislature an anti-state education department "reform bill" which threatens to pare down state agency department functions drastically with the idea that the folks in the localities can best determine their education policies.

North Carolina Senate Bill 16, which proposes to cut the NC State Department of Public Instruction by 50%, passed in both the House and Senate. Either the DPI will be substantially restructured or eliminated completely, and the legislation advocates a "back to basics" approach of reading, writing, and arithmetic. This will undoubtedly lead to educational generalization and possibly the elimination of all state level support for language study.

Colorado After a hard-fought battle last year to get standards included in the "second rung" of the state content standards, members of the Colorado Congress of Foreign Language Teachers (CCFLT) have already testified before the state legislature this year to save foreign languages from elimination.

California A severe strain on the education budget and widespread xenophobic sentiment (as exemplified by the passage of Proposition 187) may threaten language study in this ethnically diverse state. While California has been ranked as one of the top language states in the country, the State Department of Education recently released curriculum frameworks which make no mention of language study.

Washington Because of site-based management and state department of education

restructuring, the foreign language supervisor position was eliminated in 1993. While "world" languages" were included as one tier of the Communication Arts standards, public support for language study has been tepid (despite the fact that 1 in 5 jobs are tied to trade). In a series of public forums on the draft standards, 60% of the public believed that while languages should be included in the draft standards, only 30% believed that language study should become a requirement.

Georgia A strong emphasis on educational technology in Georgia has led to concerns that the technology is being misused in some cases and that teachers will be supplanted in order to cut costs. The recent election also led to the defeat of a Superintendent of Public Instruction who was strongly supportive of foreign languages.

Massachusetts While Gov. William Weld recently announced that two years of foreign language study would be obligatory for high school graduation, there were reports that the State Department of Education, as well as several local schools districts, balked at this proposal.